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CARING FOR THE OLDER HORSE AND PONY

The average horse lives to be approximately twenty years of age, although many ponies and a few horses live into their thirties. Older horses and ponies need a little extra care to ensure that they remain healthy and happy.

Feeding

Older horses and ponies need access to good quality feed and pasture as their nutrient demands increase because their digestive system becomes less efficient at converting food into energy and body tissues. This is more important if the horse is still in work. There are several commercially-available feeds specifically made for the older horse and your veterinarian will be able to help you decide which would best suit your requirements. A multi-vitamin and mineral supplement will be necessary if you are not feeding a 'complete' feed. If pasture is poor in quantity, hay should be fed. Hay should be of good quality so that it is quite readily digestible. Clean water must be available at all times.



Teeth and feet

Regular attention to tooth care will enable the older horse or pony to make best use of the feed that he/she is receiving. A visit by your veterinarian once or possibly even twice a year, is necessary to ensure that sharp enamel edges or overgrowths do not form. Tooth damage and abnormal growth can be recognized and dealt with. Regular exams are necessary to pick up periodontal disease. Equine teeth get stronger as they get older and abnormal growth problems are usually easier to correct at earlier rather than later stages. Feet should be kept trimmed, even if the horse or pony is not being exercised. This not only helps the horse move about, but reduces the risk of abnormal hoof growth and associated foot pain developing.



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Disease conditions affecting the older horse and pony

Older horses and ponies are more likely to suffer from tumors, either of the skin or internal organs, some hormonal conditions, such as Cushing's disease, degenerative diseases such as arthritis and muscle weakness, allergic respiratory disease and diseases of the liver and kidneys. This seems like a daunting list but most horses and ponies can and do lead happy and comfortable lives even in the presence of one or more of these conditions. Attention must be paid to appetite, attitude, and response to the environment and owners should look out for behavior changes which indicate poor health. A periodic blood check for signs of infectious, inflammatory, parasitic and metabolic diseases may be a helpful measure. In many cases, all that is required is a little extra care and attention.



Taking a blood sample

Vaccination and worming

As they become older, horses and ponies become more susceptible to the damaging effects of parasites and infections. The maintenance of regular worming and vaccination programs is essential to reduce the risk of ill health, either directly or indirectly related to parasite damage or infection.

Finally

Most old horses and ponies are able to lead a good quality life for many years after their working life is over. They are often excellent companions for younger horses or orphan foals. They can also be a wonderful first introduction for young children to the joys of just having a horse around.

However, it is important that we make sure that they are still enjoying their lives. This can be clearly and honestly assessed by those who know them by their demeanor and their behavior. Old horses and ponies should not be left to suffer and when they are no longer enjoying themselves for incurable conditions, humane euthanasia should be considered. However painful a decision this may be to you, it will be a kindness to your friend.

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